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DEVELOPMENT OF PROGRAMS FOR THE BLIND

PETER J. SALMON

When the curtain was first raised on the State-Federal rehabilitation program 40 years ago, the stage was practically bare and uninhabited for many disabilities, such as the cerebral palsied, epileptic and cardiacs. On the other hand, it was fairly well-stocked with almost a century of rehabilitation history in service to the blind.

To be sure, the services to the blind at that time were widely scattered, poorly coordinated, inadequately financed, and able to serve relatively few blind people. Yet, to understand the base from which the State-Federal program began, it would be helpful to review briefly some of the developments of the pre-1920 era.

In 1840 the sheltered workshop movement in the United States was launched by Samuel Gridley Howe at the Perkins School in Boston. When the 20th century turned the corner, workshops for blind persons were distributed throughout the Nation, employing hundreds of visually handicapped people.

Shortly after 1900, many State commissions for the blind were organized to coordinate and initiate services to blind persons more effectively. By 1920, a body of State legislation on behalf of blind persons had been passed, including welfare assistance, library facilities, mailing privileges, and provisions for education. By 1920, national, State, and local agencies serving blind individuals had been established and were offering rehabilitation programs. Professional organizations for teachers and other workers with the blind already had a successful history of functioning. A professional journal—*The Outlook for the Blind*—was appearing regularly in 1920, and at that early date, a rich literature on blindness was available.

One way of gaining perspective is through an examination of the files of *The Outlook for the Blind* for 1920. Among the materials published were an extensive report by Dr. Samuel P. Hayes describing the use of psychological methods in the education and rehabilitation of blind persons. In terms that were surprisingly modern, Dr. Hayes reported on the activities of the psychology department which he founded at the Overbrook School for the Blind.

Through the *Evergreen Review*, a special section of the *Outlook* devoted to the problems of blinded veterans of World War I, a picture was presented of the rehabilitation services available to this special group at the Red Cross Institute for the Blind in Baltimore, Md. Apparently the institute had many of the features which we commonly associate with rehabilitation centers today. For example, vocational training was offered in such areas as agriculture (including the operation of a poultry farm), carpentry, auto mechanics, machine shop, bookbinding, and cigarmaking. The institute also used recreation as a rehabilitative modality and included such activities as bowling, public speaking, music, journalism, and informal social meetings. In 1920, a decision was reached to admit some civilian blind persons into the program.

Some of the thinking underlying the Red Cross Institute for the Blind grew out of earlier experience with blinded civilians. The quality of this thinking may be observed from the following excerpt taken from *The Outlook for the Blind* of summer 1920: "The Federal Board [of Vocational Education] aims to send men to the Red Cross Institute for the Blind for a period of from 3 to 6 months. This enables them to come into contact with others who have a similar disability, to learn to be independent . . . and to talk with and be advised by the vocational advisor of the Federal Board who is himself totally blind."

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of the Nation's people against certain hazards and vicissitudes of life, indicated in its report the importance of rehabilitation of the disabled in a social security program. However, in its recommendations of needed legislation the report did not include any provision for rehabilitation. Nevertheless, certain rehabilitation leaders were not slow to recognize that this was the time to promote the program.

Dr. Little, Mark Walter of Pennsylvania, and a number of other State directors won approval of Frances Perkins, then Secretary of Labor and chairman of the Economic Security Committee, for including a provision in the pending social security bill to expand the vocational rehabilitation program. This provision took the form of amendments to the basic Federal legislation which provided for permanent authorization of annual appropriations of grants to States double the amount provided before.

During this period in the evolution of rehabilitation, Mark Walter came prominently to the front through his active participation in all movements to advance vocational rehabilitation nationally. All the while he was building a State service which has become one of the foremost in the country in staff organization, financial support, service and operative standards, and public backing. With the ending of his active public career there came to fruition his building of a magnificent State-operated rehabilitation center at Johnstown, Pa.

As president of NRA in 1936, Walter helped increase membership greatly. One of the founders of the Council of State Directors of Vocational Rehabilitation, he gave this organization a strong impetus to becoming an effective instrumentality in promotion of professional advancement of rehabilitation personnel. In addition to his assistance in the vital amendments to the Social Security Act, he was also a leader in drafting and promoting passage of Public Law 113 (1943) which became the most forward piece of legislation for the handicapped.

At the time of passage of the epoch-making Barden-LaFollette Act of 1943, the director of rehabilitation in Georgia was Paul S. Barrett. Essentially a businessman and promoter of high order, Barrett's education, training, and experience had been much broadened by his service abroad after World War I with the Hoover Food Administration. A born administrator, he embraced every opportunity under the new act to expand and develop his own rehabilitation activities in Georgia. The

Georgia Division of Vocational Rehabilitation became one of the leading programs of the country.

As president of NRA in 1948-49, Barrett was most zealous in his drive to build a strong association, as well as effective National and State legislation. No leader in rehabilitation did more than he to increase the financial assets of the association and to bring about the establishment of a strong executive directorship and staff organization.

Work of States' Council

In a summary account of the careers of State rehabilitation leaders, notice should be taken of the work of the States' Council. Working in close cooperation with the Federal office, this organization has made significant contributions to the professional and technical advancement of the program. This has been due in large part to the efficient leadership and inspiration of its long line of presidents, among whom are: Faulkes; Walter; R. C. Thompson of Maryland; E. P. Chester of Connecticut; R. N. Anderson of Virginia; Ray Power of West Virginia; C. F. Feike of Oregon; P. G. Sherer of South Carolina; Hank Smith of Tennessee; Burt Aycock of the Louisiana program for the blind; E. M. Oliver of Washington; Ben Brainerd of Minnesota; Sid Hendrix of Louisiana; and Harry Simmons of the Florida agency for the blind.

At a particularly crucial time for rehabilitation (1941-1944), Claud Andrews of Florida, then NRA president, guided the affairs of the association with a firm hand and a sound policy of administration. He was succeeded by R. C. Thompson of Maryland who carried forward the active role of the association in promoting the program. "Tommie," as he is known by rehabilitation people over the country, is a liberal-conservative in rehabilitation thinking and action. His influence in the development of the national program has been strong and diverse. Always ready to give assistance in any area and available for any service, his wise counsel has been most helpful both to the Federal office and to his State colleagues.

In this article covering a period which ended in 1950, the author has given a brief account of the contributions, as he observes them, of some of the State leaders who helped in a large way to advance the national rehabilitation program. Others did their share, also; they deserve proper recognition when a complete history of the program is written.

Thus, by 1920, rehabilitation services for blind persons, when compared with services for other disability groups, were probably more highly developed. The achievement of this stage of development was due, in part, to the work of a few exceptional leaders in the field, but also to certain characteristics of service to blind persons.

The present widely used definition of blindness¹ did not come into general acceptance until after the passage of the Social Security Act in 1935. However, the disability of blindness, in its lower limits at least, was reasonably recognizable in service terms before then. By working with handicapped persons who had this characteristic, professional workers were able to focus their efforts upon them. Such an approach made possible the development of facilities, resources, and literature which might have come much later if a broader disability grouping had been attempted.

A tradition of local and State service had been created which promoted the idea of community responsibility for blind citizens.

Through library services, the American Printing House for the Blind, and legislative enactments, a precedent had been established that the Federal Government had a legitimate concern for blind individuals needing educational and rehabilitation services.

As a result, the public programs of vocational rehabilitation faced different problems in the area of blindness than in other disability areas. Although existing programs in 1920 had ideas and history, they also had very limited funds and an ingrained quality that was a product of their professional isolation.

Over the years, the Federal program has changed the face of service for the blind. As a result of the stimulus it provided, the public program modified by the Barden-LaFollette amendments and Public Law 565 has reconstructed whole segments of this field. Among its many contributions have been: A new emphasis upon the restoration of vision; introduction of the concept of comprehensive rehabilitation programs offered, in part, through rehabilitation centers; introduction of vocational rehabilitation services into sections of the country and communities where such services had not previously existed; through the setting of standards and through contractual arrangements, the enrichment of existing local, State, and national pro-

grams for blind persons; acceleration of interest in vocational placement and competitive employment for blind persons (since the goal of the Federal program is employment, its efforts have been instrumental in redirecting interest in service to the blind from sheltered to industrial and commercial work settings).

The success of the public program encouraged those who work with blind persons to seek additional national provisions. For example, passage of the Randolph-Shephard Act and the Wagner-O'Day Act were, in part, based on the successful functioning of Federal rehabilitation services.

Under the demonstration and research provision of Public Law 565, many agencies for the blind have been able to innovate, experiment, and expand services in such diversified areas as the hearing problems of blind persons, mobility, optical aids, psychological aspects of blindness, and services to the deaf-blind.

In reviewing the history of rehabilitation during the past 40 years, one is impressed by the impact of the State-Federal program service to blind individuals. Some of the features of this impact are—

The evolution of effective working relationships among public and private agencies. Because the public program started after a large number of private programs had been functioning for decades, the interrelationships among agencies was a matter of concern to all. From the beginning, the public program adopted policies which favored cooperative efforts among all services.

The wisdom of this policy is striking on this 40th Anniversary. There has been room under the public program "umbrella" for rehabilitation efforts in the States and localities by public and private agencies alike. In fact, the State-Federal program has made it possible for many aspects of private agency programs to flourish.

Preservation of differentiated services for the blind. The public program has recognized that the rehabilitation of blind persons has unique problems that are often best solved in a setting developed especially for this disability group. Among the problems which confront the rehabilitation worker are; mobility, communication, the development of the other senses, special psychological and attitudinal problems of blindness, and the special challenge of training and placement. Federal rehabilitation

legislation has tended to preserve the differentiated agency for the blind. In fact, about three-fourths of the States now maintain separate State rehabilitation agencies for blind persons. This is consistent with the belief that the interests of the blind rehabilitant are most effectively served through personnel and resources which are especially adapted to his needs.

This approach has been one of the keys to the substantial success of the State-Federal rehabilitation program as it relates to blind persons. Experience has indicated that these problems are best solved in a special setting, designed to provide the resources, personnel, and time required to make an adequate diagnosis and undertake an effective treatment process.

Cultivation of communication between service to the blind and other rehabilitation areas. The feeling that blind persons should be rehabilitated through agencies set up expressly to serve this group has had concrete advantages for the individual blind client. At the same time, however, it has raised the possibility that professional isolation might lead to stagnation in the field. The State-Federal program has played an essential role in preventing reaction within service to the blind. Although it has recognized the need for separate services, the public program has exerted every effort to provide "inter-disability" communication. Thus it has been possible for those in service to blind individuals to learn about and adapt the best in experimentation and experience of those working with other disability groups.

Through conferences, publications, and consultations, the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation has brought to workers for the blind fresh ideas and new approaches. This has been essential because rehabilitation services for other disability groups have made enormous strides. In some areas, the progress has been so marked that it has been possible for service to the blind with its longer history and tradition to benefit from the advanced thinking developed in work with the mentally retarded, the emotionally disturbed, and the physically handicapped. In fact, it is now widely recognized that many blind persons are multihandicapped, requiring services that cross the usual boundaries of blindness.

Encouragement of service to the severely disabled blind person. For many years blindness was considered so disabling in and of itself that it

was almost inconceivable that the multihandicapped blind person could be rehabilitated. The first steps toward enlightenment were taken by a few local and State agencies which became interested in the problems of deafness, mental retardation, and emotional disturbance associated with blindness. These rehabilitation problems are exceedingly difficult and complex. Without national encouragement, services to this group might have been materially impaired. However, the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation and the State rehabilitation agencies have increasingly served as catalysts in reaching the multidisabled blind person. For example, in encouraging research on deaf-blindness and through its sponsorship of demonstration and research projects in hearing handicaps among the blind, the OVR has made a real contribution to the whole field.

Assistance by OVR in service to the blind. Through maintaining a special section on the blind, the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation has placed itself in a position of great helpfulness to State and private agencies. As a result OVR representatives have been enabled to participate in local, State, and national conferences and to contribute to decisions vital to the entire field. In addition, through its specialized staff in service to the blind, OVR has assisted many programs to achieve greater success and effectiveness than would have been possible otherwise. Workers for the blind have come to turn to OVR personnel for assistance in a large variety of matters.

The past 40 years have been exceptionally fruitful for blind persons in the United States. Services are better coordinated, directed, and financed, and are available to blind persons everywhere. Much of the credit for the development that have taken place belongs to the State-Federal program. Through its intelligent cooperation with other groups and agencies, it has won the respect and confidence of workers in the field and, in turn, it has exerted a powerful influence upon these workers, elevating their horizons and strengthening their competency. We are all aware that in 1960 we stand at only the threshold in rehabilitation work with the blind.

¹ The term "blind person" means any person who has not more than 20/200 of visual acuity in the better eye with corrective lenses; or visual acuity greater than 20/200, but with a limitation in the fields of vision such that the widest diameter of the visual field subtends an angle no greater than 20°.

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